Essex County Learning Community

Phase I Report

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Essex County
LEARNING COMMUNITY

PETER & ELIZABETH
TOWER FOUNDATION

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introduction

The need, vision, and purpose of the Essex County Learning Community.

introduction

About ECLC

In May 2018, New Profit's *Reimagine Learning Fund*, in partnership with the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), launched the first cohort of the Essex County Learning Community(ECLC), a cross-district experience to bring together leadership teams and teachers from six public school districts (Beverly, Danvers, Gloucester, Haverhill, Rockport, and Swampscott) in Essex County, MA.

The goal of ECLC is to use a community of practitioners approach to lift up and scale systemic approaches that enable schools to better serve students with diverse learning assets and needs across the spectrum.

For the first phase of the project, almost 100 educators from the six participating districts engaged in cross-district professional development from May through December 2018.

This report summarizes what we have learned so far and makes recommendations to guide future work.

introduction

About ECLC

For this initial phase, New Profit and CCE convened a cross-district learning community organized around two groups working in tandem, (1) **District Lead Teams** of 5-7 members that included a superintendent or assistant superintendent, director of special education, and special and general education teachers; and (2) **Cross District Teacher Topical Groups.** Both groups engaged in collaborative inquiry cycles and consultancies about classroom, school and district dilemmas; shared professional development; and identified district and school systems and policies that needed to change in three areas:

Academic Tier 1

Social-Emotional Learning

Cultural Competency

Participating districts each received a $25,000 grant, the opportunity to focus on educational dilemmas, as well as access to nationally-known experts on equity, social-emotional learning and trauma, universal design for learning. and multi-tiered systems of support.

The ECLC experience was designed to achieve the following outcomes:

A shift in participant mindset around learning and cultural differences

A strong sense of network cohesion, even beyond the duration of the formal learning community

The creation of district plans containing strategies for change at the district, school, and classroom level

ECLC participants also took part in a two-day Summer Institute and a Showcase of Learning in December

introduction

Why We Need ECLC

The participating districts serve increasingly diverse student populations, including a large population of students with high-needs[1]. Districts face challenges in meeting the needs of these diverse learners.

The six participating districts enroll just over 21,000 students– the majority of whom are White (73%) with a substantial Latinx (19%) population, as well as a smaller share of African American/Black (3%) and Asian (2%) students. About 3% of students are categorized as "Other" in reporting.

Additionally, almost half of all students (46%) are designated as "high needs," meaning that they are either students with disabilities (21%), and/or English Learners (6%) or former English Learner, and/ or economically disadvantaged (32%).

[1]High-needs is the unduplicated count of all students who belong to at least one of the listed groups; therefore, the total % high-needs is lower than the sum of all groups.

Why We Need the ECLC

The current system does not work for all students.

Overall, students with disabilities, English Learners, and low-income students face more learning challenges than their peers; and Black and Latinx students often have worse outcomes than White and Asian students.

For instance, the chronic absenteeism rate for Black and Latinx students (26%) in the ECLC districts is twice that of White students (13%); the mean 4-year graduation rate is 88% overall but there are large disparities by race/ethnicity, EL and SWD status (see sidebar); and there are also substantial disparities between student groups on the state assessment (see chart on next page), making it clear that the current system does not work for all students.

ECLC district 4-year high school graduation rate (2018)

88% all students

90% White students

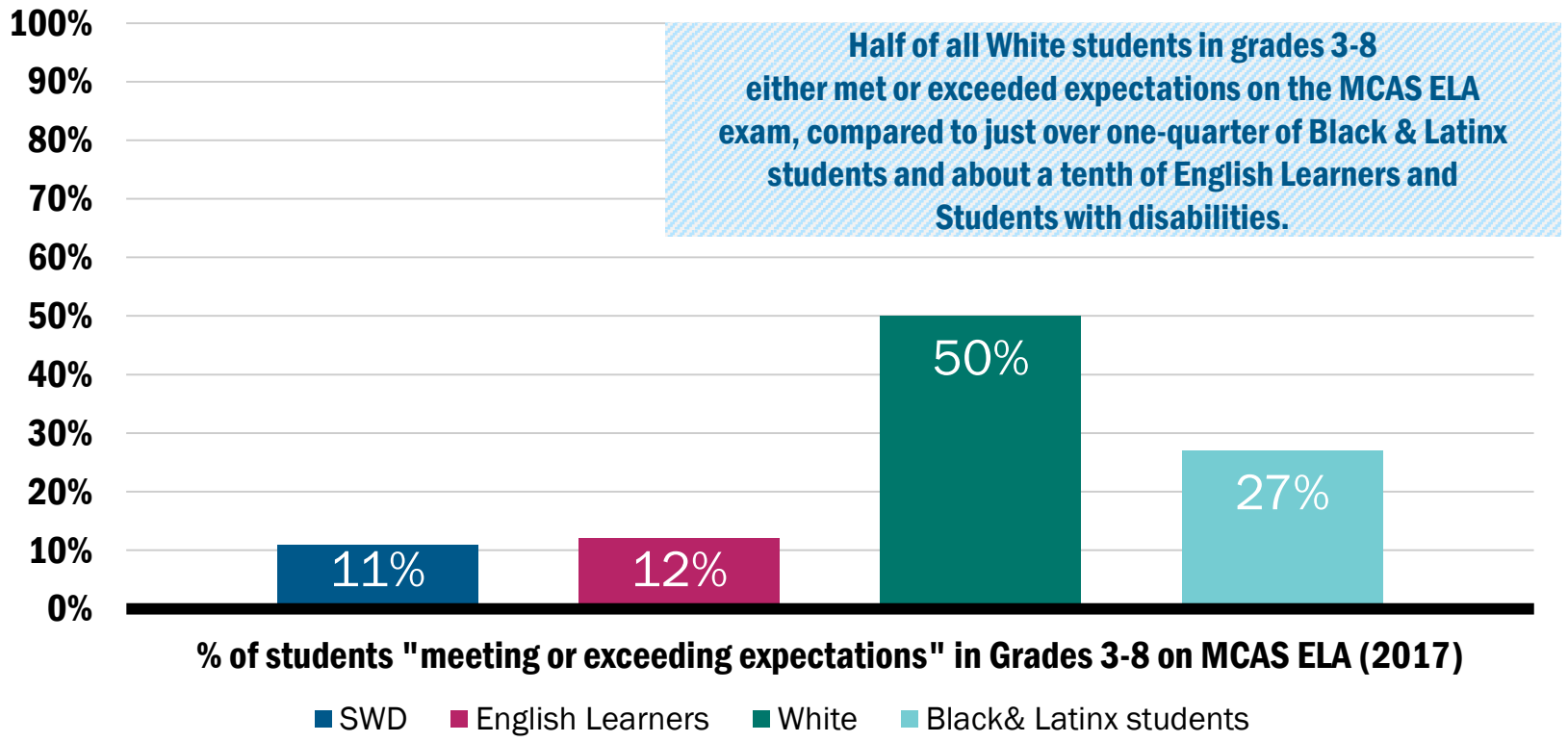
77% Black & Latinx students

69% Students with disabilities

59% English Learners

Source: MADESE school and district profiles (2018)

2017 MCAS performance



Source: MADESE school and district profiles (2018)

Why We Need the ECLC

Additionally, educators report difficulty in serving three particular student groups:

Students who "resist conforming to traditional school culture or instructional approaches" (37% of respondents)

Students with a first language other than English (34%)

Students who "may have gaps in their foundational knowledge/perform below grade level" (24%)

The biggest challenges districts face in meeting the needs of students include:

1. Closing achievement gaps
2. Creating safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments
3. Shifting mindsets of stakeholders to believe that all students can learn
4. Supporting educators in addressing these challenges through effective practices

Why We Need ECLC

Educators identified several challenges they face in working with these student groups, chief among them was a lack of time.

When prompted to provide more detail about any student group they indicated some difficulty working with, respondents cited lack of time, including lack of collaborative time with other teachers and specialists, lack of planning time, and inadequate time to work with the students themselves. Additional challenges included:

- Limited resources such as materials, language support (translation services etc.)
- Limited training for staff to develop complex instructional approaches
- Communicating with students and getting to know their cultures
- Limited access to trained staff (e.g. Sheltered English Immersion)

These were some of the challenges and dilemmas that educators addressed in the learning community and in creating their district plans. To support diverse students or students with learning differences, teachers/educators need an understanding of individual difference and diverse cultures and community to ensure inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards.

"I feel that the challenges in educating ELLs and students who don't conform to traditional school culture is time, especially collaborative time. Teachers need time to plan for these students and the amount of planning time is not sufficient. We need to allow general education teachers time to collaborate with ESL and special educators in order to plan access to lessons/ curriculum."

It is difficult to differentiate instruction to meet all the needs of students. In a given day, I may teach six different classes, requiring six different preps -- this gives me one period to complete all my paperwork for special education, update grades, provide feedback on student writing, touch base with colleagues about a student, collaborate with a co-teacher, make photocopies, send parent e-mail etc... I put in much effort to provide rigorous lessons that meet students at their level of learning. I am being pulled in too many directions.

Teacher Topical Group participant

educator mindsets

Evaluation questions:

What mindsets about students with learning differences do participants have on entry into the learning community?

What, if any, changes in mindset do participants report at the end of phase1?

The hardest part of learning something new is not embracing new ideas but **letting go of old ones.**

Todd Rose

Author of *The End of Average*

Director of the Mind, Brain, & Education Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

Why educator mindsets

Mindsets[2] are the "basic assumptions, beliefs, core values, goals, and expectations shared by a group of people who are committed to a specific field, and what they use as rules to guide their attitudes and practice in that field."

Belief is a major component of mindset as what we believe the nature of situations should be determines or influences our expectations and goals. For example, educators' beliefs (also ideally, but not always, learners', families' and communities' beliefs) about what schools should achieve determines the face of school systems, such as the design of schools' key characteristics and their major functions. Therefore, creating change in education means identifying, connecting and changing mindsets if/as needed.

Guided by this understanding and the assumption, informed by research, that mindsets can be changed with training, we assessed the following mindsets among ECLC participants using a pre/post survey:

- **Growth/Fixed mindset**
- **Inclusion/Separation models for educating students with mild to moderate disabilities**
- **Colorblindness/Awareness of student race, ethnicity and disability status**
- **Deficit/Asset-based thinking with respect to student culture, language and ethnic background**
- **Equality/Equity mindset with respect to student opportunities and outcomes**

[2]Definition of mindsets taken from Fang, Kang and Lui,(2004), Measuring Mindset Change in the Systemic Transformation of Education. The pre/post survey was informed by the Framework of educator mindsets and consequences by Filback & Green (2013).

Mindsets at start of learning community

Participants having an overall growth mindset and openness to reflection are important for the objectives and outcomes of the learning community.

At the start of the ECLC, participants indicated an overall growth mindset and openness to reflection, which are important for the objectives and outcomes of the learning community.

A growth mindset indicates that participants are willing to challenge their beliefs, try new things and grow. Additionally, being able to promote a growth mindset in a school/classroom environment is also important for student learning.

Participants also indicated that they often reflected on their practice. The vast majority (93%) either "strongly agreed or agreed" with the statement "I often reflect on my actions to see whether I could have improved on what I did."

This was important as reflection plays an important part in teachers' professional behavior and professional development as the ability to reflect on practice is a basis for learning; and participants would have to be willing to reflect on their experiences - professional and personal perhaps – to do this work.

Notably, at the end of phase 1, 86% of participants indicated that the learning community encouraged them to reflect on their practice.

educator mindsets

Mindsets at start of learning community

Overall, participants endorsed positive mindsets about working with diverse learners in theory but not necessarily in practice.

At the beginning of the learning community, participants generally indicated support of critical concepts for educating diverse learners[3]. A majority **"strongly agreed"** that "all students bring strengths to school" **(71%)**, "I aim to treat all students fairly. . .recognizing that students experience school differently" **(62%)**, "I set and have high expectations for all my students" **(47%)**, and "I actively seek to get to know my students, including acknowledging their cultural background"(**32%).** However, when asked about putting these concepts into practice, educators showed less consistency, endorsing or reporting practices that were in conflict with some of these positive mindsets.

For instance, while participants indicated strong support for an inclusion model for SWD overall, there was mixed support for the effectiveness of inclusion in practice with about **1 out of 4 agreeing to some extent with the following statements**:

- **I have doubts about the effectiveness of including SWD in general education classrooms because they often lack the academic skills necessary for success (27%)**
- **I have doubts about the effectiveness of including SWD in general education classrooms because they often lack the social skills necessary for success (23%)**

Additionally, there was no consensus about eliminating separate classrooms for students with mild to moderate disabilities. With 41% disagreeing to some extent that "most or all separate classrooms that exclusively serve students with mild to moderate disabilities (i.e. most restrictive environments) should be eliminated."

[3]Participants could indicate the extent to which they agreed with several statements using this scale- 1=Strongly disagree; 2= Disagree; 3= Somewhat disagree; 4= Neither agree nor disagree; 5= Somewhat agree; 6= Agree; 7 = Strongly agree)

Changes in mindset

ECLC promotes an asset-based mindset.

At the end of phase 1, participants reported a stronger asset-based mindset. Educators with an asset-based mindset (versus a deficit mindset) believe that students from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds can learn and bring strengths to schools; learn about, recognize and acknowledge disconnects between school and students' home cultures; and engage and challenge students by tapping into their unique strengths and traits. On the post-survey:

- 87% "strongly agreed" that "all students bring strengths to school" (+16% points from pre-survey)
- 58% "strongly agreed" that "I set and have high expectations for all my students" (+11% points from pre-survey)
- 17% "strongly agreed" that "I am able to draw on my students' cultural and language assets" (+10% points from pre-survey)

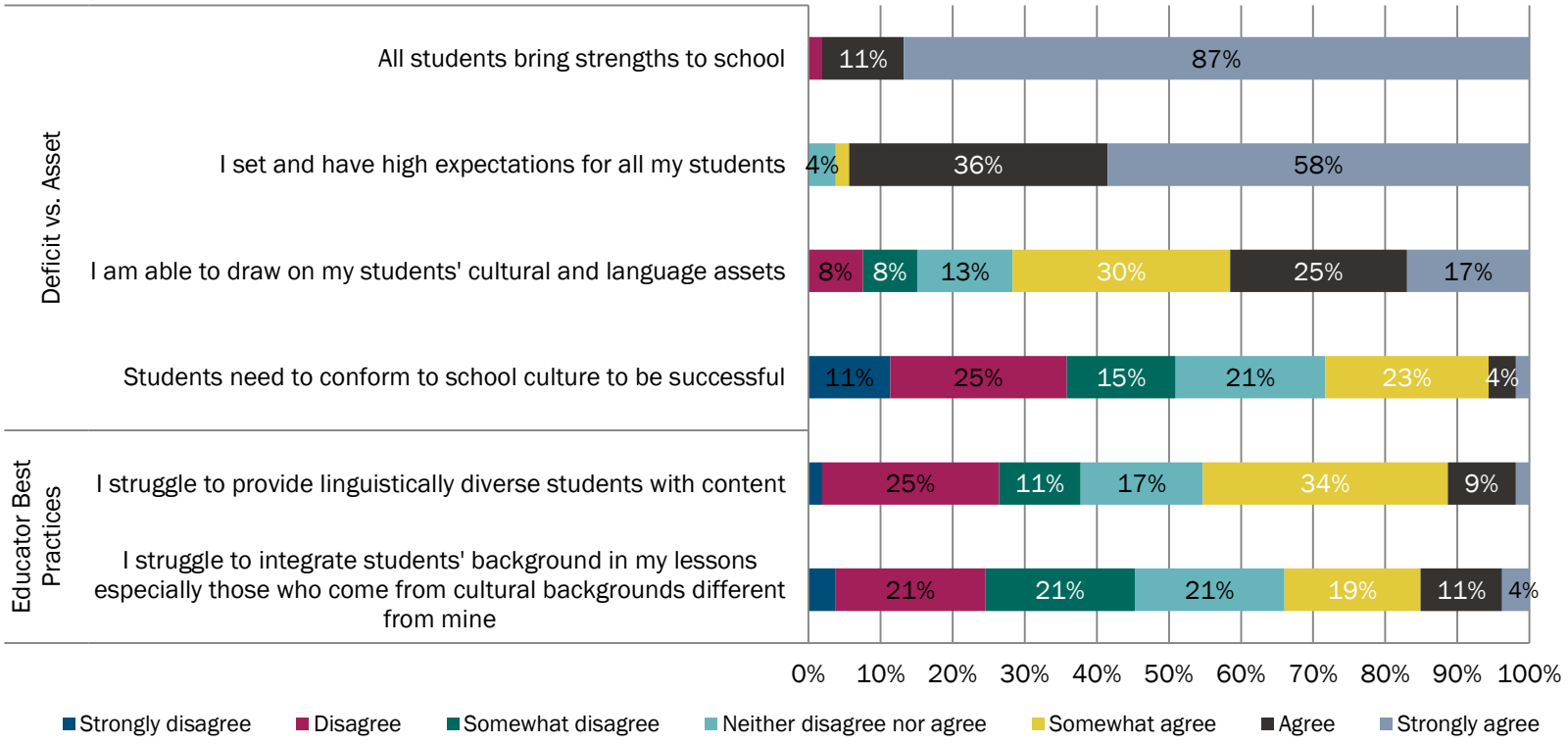
Participants still reported very mixed attitudes on whether or not "students need to conform to school culture to be successful", which is perhaps not surprising given this is one of the three student groups that a significant share of educators indicated they have "difficulty" working with or serving.

"[This experience] made me think of other cultural groups not as "accountability inconveniences" but as "asset-rich resources". In this era of high-stakes testing, we all feel so much pressure to improve test scores that I am sometimes guilty of the former."

Cultural Competency Topical Team member

educator mindsets: asset-based vs. deficit mindset*

Distribution of post-survey responses



*n= 92 on pre-survey and n=53 on post-survey

educator mindsets

Changes in mindset

Some of the most consistent changes, on average, were around educator mindset on the practice of inclusion.

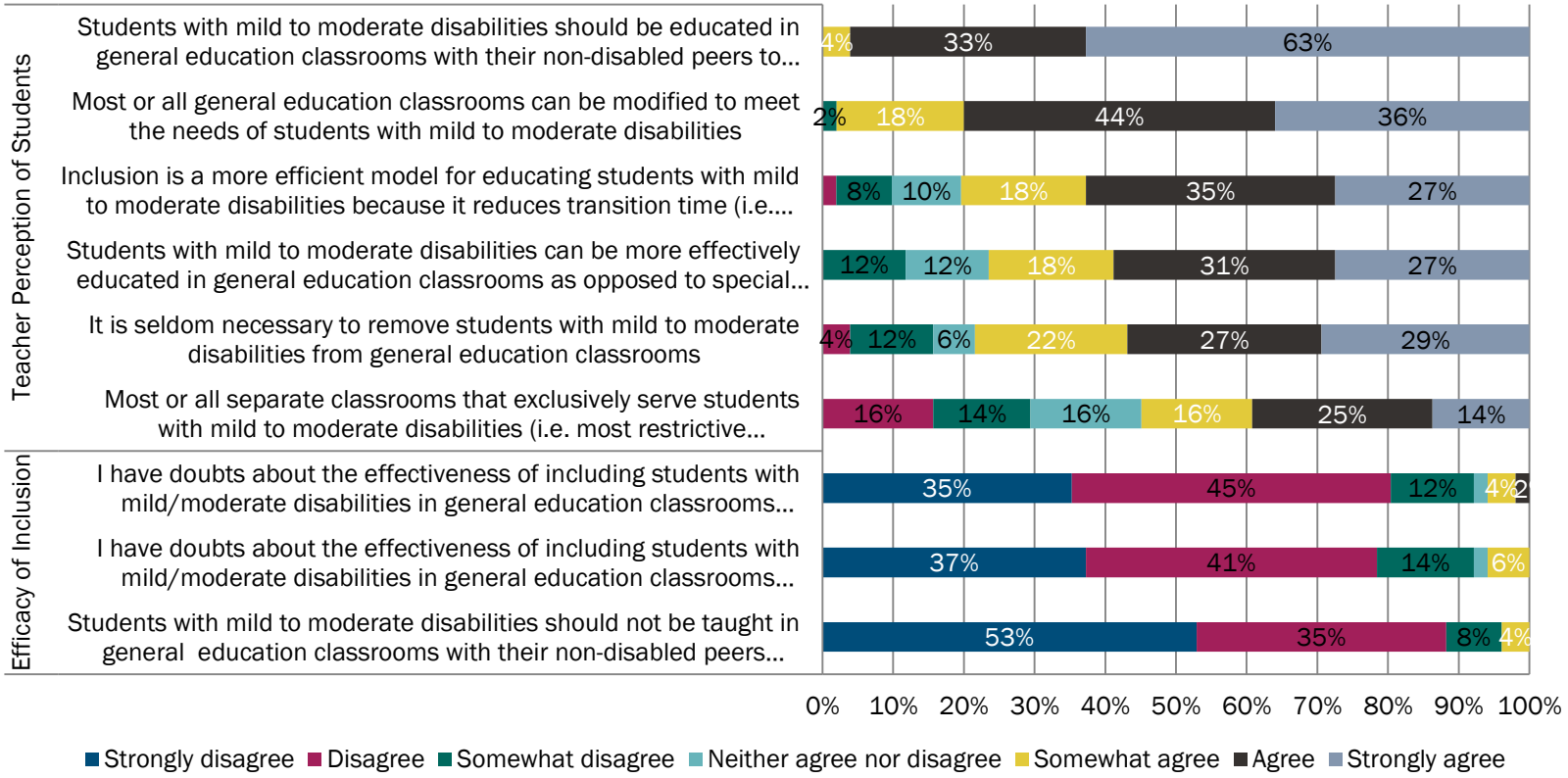
There is a substantial research base supporting inclusion, the practice of educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms, for students with special needs. The practice is mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the federal requirement to disaggregate student performance data (see ESEA/NCLB or ESSA) has arguably led schools to increase access to general education for students with special needs. However, successful inclusion of students depends not only on policy or mandates but educators' and administrators' beliefs and practice.

Some of the most consistent changes, on average, were around educator mindset on the practice of inclusion:

- 36% "strongly agreed" that "most or all general education classrooms can be modified to meet the needs of students with mild to moderate disabilities (+10% points from pre-survey)
- 27% "strongly agreed" that "students with disabilities can be more effectively educated in general education classrooms as opposed to special education classrooms" (+10% points from pre-survey)
- 29% "strongly agreed" that "it is seldom necessary to remove students with mild to moderate disabilities from general education classrooms(+12% points from pre-survey)

Additionally, participants indicated an incremental increase in their support for the efficacy of inclusion although there still was no consensus on eliminating the most restrictive environments for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

Distribution of post-survey responses



Changes in mindset

ECLC promotes awareness of race/ethnicity

Early results also suggest that participants were becoming increasingly aware (vs. colorblind) in recognizing the role that race and ethnicity play in students' educational experiences. Colorblind educators prefer to believe that student background is unrelated to their opportunities, performance and school experience. They may also regard race/ethnicity as a "taboo" topic and avoid it in conversations, their curriculum and in decision-making.

- 49% "strongly agreed" that "I actively seek to get to know my students, including acknowledging their cultural background" (+17% points from pre-survey)
- 49% either "strongly disagreed or disagreed" that "I try not to discuss topics on race/ethnicity" (+20% points from pre-survey)
- 73% either "strongly disagreed or disagreed" that "student background and identity are unrelated to their academic performance" (+13% points from pre-survey)

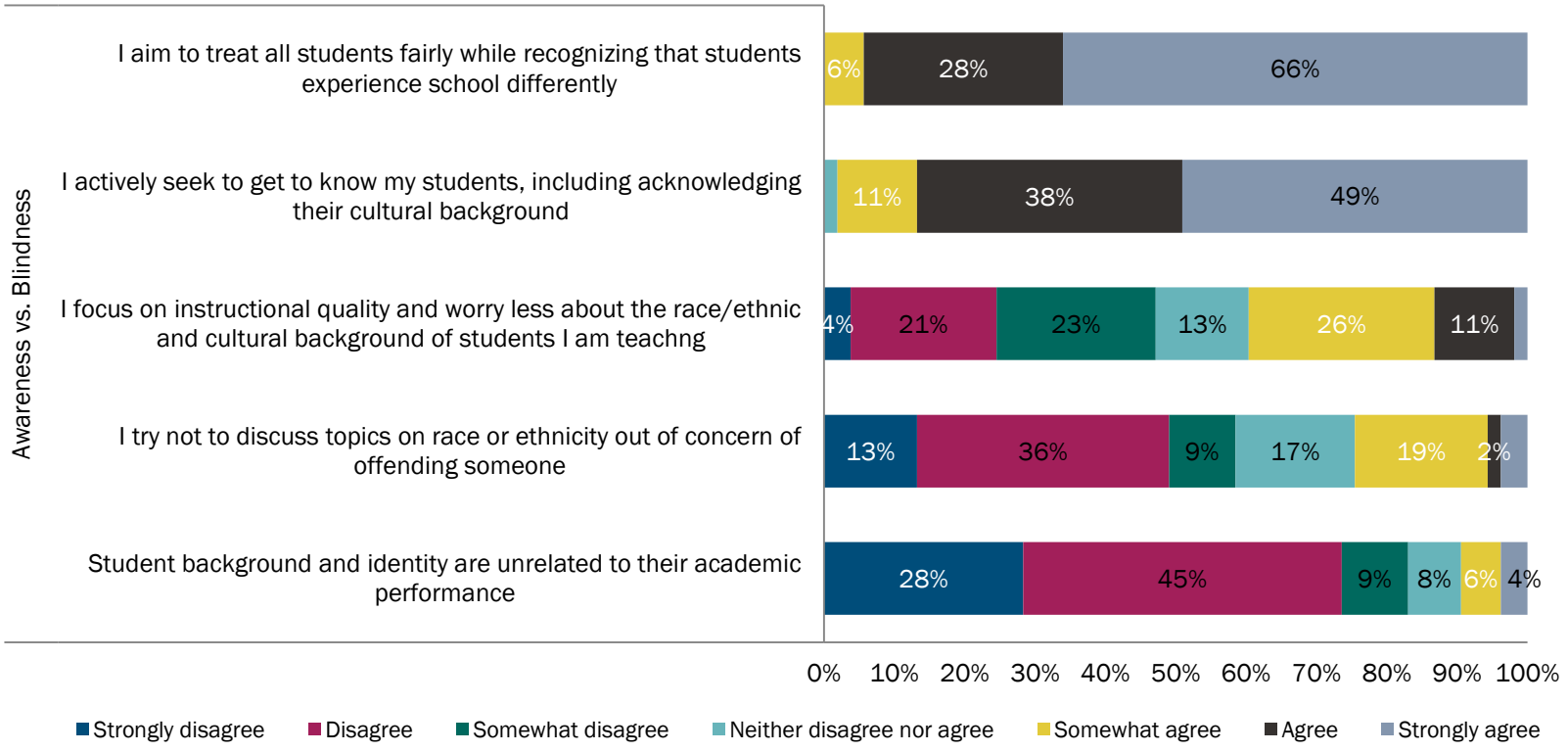
However, even with this increasing awareness and willingness to address topics and issues on race/ethnicity in conversations, participants hold a range of attitudes about how to balance or manage their focus on instructional quality with a focus on student race/ethnic and cultural background.

"Having conversations, whether they are positive or they are difficult, you have to have these conversations in order to be able to move forward and get to your best practices."

Teacher, Swampscott, Cultural Competency Topical Team member

educator mindsets: colorblind vs. aware*

Distribution of post-survey responses



*n= 92 on pre-survey and n=53 on post-survey

Changes in mindsets

More explicit or intentional discussion of equality and equity may be warranted.

Finally, while participants seemed to endorse an equity mindset from the start, they also indicated support for an equality mindset and these positions remained largely unchanged over the course of phase 1. Specifically:

- While three-quarters (76%) either "strongly agreed or agreed" that "students' identity and background play an important role in how they access and perform in school" (+2% points from pre-survey)
- 51% either "strongly agreed or agreed" that "all students must be treated the same/equally regardless of differences in gender, race/ethnicity etc." (unchanged from pre-survey)

These are two concepts/words that can sometimes be used interchangeably and may require more intentional discussion to surface participant understanding and analysis of how these mindsets operate and inform their practice.

Educators with an equality mindset typically endorse the idea that all students be treated the same. They believe in meritocracy, that is, that achievement is based solely or mostly on student ability or effort and ignoring or being unaware of how larger, often systemic, issues affect student access, opportunities and outcomes.

In contrast educators with an equity mindset, understand that multiple factors, including systemic factors, affect how students access and perform in school—disadvantaging some and privileging others. To increase the likelihood that all students have opportunity to access education, learn and demonstrate what they know and can do, an equity-minded educator provides the needed supports.

changes in practice

Evaluation question:

What changes, if any, have participants made thus far as a result of participating in the learning community?

changes in practice

Educator Practice

With changes in mindsets or beliefs, come changes in practice. ECLC participants have already begun to implement what they have learned in their practice.

Participants reported changes in practice in several areas, including:

- Increasing student voice and choice in the classroom
- Using more culturally-relevant instructional & family engagement practices
- Using data to inform practice

"I have already introduced much more choice for my students when it comes to demonstrating knowledge and accessing knowledge. I plan to continue this practice."

Teacher, Beverly, District Lead Team member

"I think my experiences have helped me to think more deeply about binary thinking...and small changes in language. For example, [using] "and" instead of "but", [if] may seem small, but has transformative power in my own thinking and in conversation with and about students."

Teacher, Gloucester, Cultural Competency Teacher Topical group member

"With each new unit, I plan to send an invitation to families to contribute their own experiences as they relate to the topic. This is an effort to engage families across boundaries. I have left the method of contribution open-ended. I send this invitation home in three languages."

Teacher, Rockport, District Lead Team member

"I plan to include more content material relevant to my students' backgrounds and to try to be more aware of any unconscious bias I may have toward students from various backgrounds."

Specialist/Instructional Coach, Beverly, Cultural Competency Teacher Topical Team member

changes in practice

Educator Practice

"I am now putting more effort into having students identify their strengths and utilize them to learn and demonstrate what they know. Also students are recognizing areas they need to improve in and working on those areas. Helping students be more self aware of their strengths and areas they need to improve makes them a part of the process."

Teacher, Swampscott, Academic Tier I Topical Team member

"I have always been a strong advocate for students with learning differences and have always advocated for inclusion as much as possible. I feel this learning community reconfirmed how important it is to include children in the general education classroom. When I articulate my concerns and/or voice my opinion, I know others have heard and understand the research and hopefully we will move in that direction soon. With changing my teaching, I feel that I am much more culturally aware of what I talk about and/or say. I try to choose a variety or texts, videos and books when I'm teaching so that it addresses cultural issues."

Teacher, Danvers, District Lead Team member

"Rather than rely purely on anecdotal information about my students' social-emotional functioning, I have started collecting data on my "heavy hitters" using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). I will administer it again later in the year to help determine whether my interventions are having a positive impact."

School Counselor, Haverhill, SEL Teacher Topical Team member

a learning community approach

Evaluation questions:

What are the benefits of a learning community approach?

How satisfied were participants with learning community activities?

We are **not alone** in our dilemmas.

District Lead Team participant

a learning community approach

Cross-district collaboration

"Other districts have the same struggles as my district [in] supporting all students. The vision of all participants is very similar, we all want what is best for students."

Participants had an overwhelmingly positive response to the cross-district learning community approach, which revealed right away shared or similar struggles facing districts in supporting all students, as well as a similar determination to address these issues. This "common thread" provided a clear value proposition to participating in the learning community.

Participants noted that it was helpful to engage in this work collectively as they usually work in isolation and benefited from learning about the different approaches or solutions that districts were proposing to address the same challenges. The collective approach also gave participants more confidence that this effort was not a "one-time" thing but rather the first phase of a longer-term vision and strategy for their communities.

"For us to come together as a North Shore community is really awesome to build those connections, and I think we should work together more because everyone has such strengths."

Special education teacher, Beverly

a learning community approach

Within-district collaboration

In addition to the benefits of cross-district collaboration, participants also emphasized how valuable it was to collaborate with colleagues in their own districts. Participants noted that, typically, they mostly collaborate with colleagues in similar roles, so the opportunity to go beyond their "silos" and hear the insights and perspectives of others in a variety of roles across their district was extremely beneficial.

Having facilitators at within-district meetings could improve collaboration even more.

However, there was variation among districts as to how well or efficiently they were able to meet and collaborate. In some districts it went smoothly, as a Teacher Topical group member explained, "our district lead team pulled topical team members into review a tentative district plan. . .they were open to our feedback and wanted to hear from us." But others shared that they had limited input on the district plan and they had "a very hard time being listened to by the admin, and didn't meet at all with their admin." Some participants also struggled with how and to what extent Cultural Competency was included in their district plans, suggesting that the Academic and SEL topics were more familiar and "less risky" and those ideas were more readily accepted.

"I think it's been really positive because it's allowed a group of people from our district who don't typically work together to be involved in some pretty well-structured meaningful, and substantive professional development."

Elementary teacher, Swampscott

"I liked the composition of the leadership teams, with administrators, and you had the special education director, and we had a principal. We had regular teachers as part of the team, then special ed teachers, on the team. It was all of us getting together, we'd talk administratively about things. Then we'd meet with our teachers. But sometimes we're not all equals at a table together. **What I loved about this, we were equals at a table**. Then we could all hear perspectives."

Asst. Superintendent Teaching & Learning
30 years experience

"The meetings have been extremely beneficial. The conversations across districts allowed us time to share ideas, thoughts, and strategies. It has also promoted collaboration, leadership and a shared vision to support our students."

Social-Emotional Topical Group member

a learning community approach

Participant satisfaction

Overall, participants were very satisfied with the learning community approach and activities (including facilitation, guest speakers, materials and coaching provided). At the end of the phase 1:

- 74% agreed that it motivated them to do something different in their practice
- 60% that it helped them to identify specific strategies or ideas of how to improve their practice, and
- Almost half (46%) also agreed that at times the experience challenged their ideas or beliefs about working with students

And while the experience provided some new information a majority said that "it mainly reinforced what they already knew". Continuing to challenge participants and exposing them to new content should be a goal of the next phase of work for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2.

"I felt the meeting was well-structured, well-paced and that the goals of the meeting were reached. The facilitator who worked with the groups I was part of was skilled, open to hearing all ideas and guided additional reflection of individuals and the collective groups."

District Lead Team member

Participant satisfaction

Time and pacing was the most frequently and consistently mentioned challenge or recommendation for change made over the course of the project.

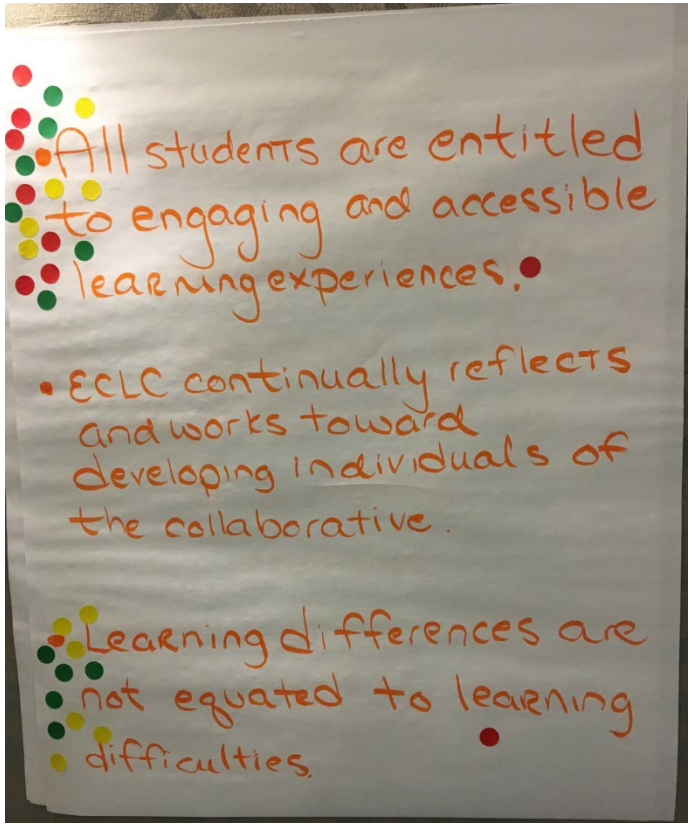
Participants felt the time commitment was worthwhile, but quite substantial, and at times struggled to keep up with the pace of the work required to be part of the learning community and to complete district plans. For instance, in exit surveys and focus groups, participants shared that **they felt rushed in creating district plans** and that **drafts were due while research was going on** and some **members of the topical teams felt disappointed that they were not able to contribute as they had hoped to to their district plans**– a case of putting the "cart before the horse".

Participants don't necessarily want to devote less time to the learning community (as again they found it worthwhile) but rather wanted clearer expectations about the time demands at the start of the project; a clearer "vision of the expected final product" suggesting that a template for the district plan would have helped; and also recommend **more team time at meetings**, especially as they get closer to due dates for district plans. They also requested that **more time be devoted to guest speakers and Q&A when they are present at meetings**.

Additionally, they suggested that future cohorts share draft district plans earlier as a network (and not just at the Showcase) to get feedback.

"The one thing I feel I need, which is virtually impossible given all our various responsibilities is time…more time. I could have listened to, engaged in conversation, and actively reflected on the impact of cultural biases for longer. I came away with lots of thoughts and wished we [had] been more focused in our breakout discussion in terms of how to incorporate into our [district] plans."

District Lead Team member



a learning community approach

Participant satisfaction

Given the time demands, participants want to know that their school and district leaders also engaged in this effort and understand the commitment.

Finally, given the substantial time demands, participants wanted their principals and superintendents to appreciate the time and commitment (even if they have their tacit support) and recommended that school and district leaders be invited to ECLC meetings to see the work participants were doing and not just the end product.

"I do think that it would be helpful if ECLC was to let administrators know that [they]need to make sure to give time and space for the work that has been done in topical and lead teams to be able to quickly share what they've been doing, what they've been working on, or maybe take some of those small, little conversation pieces we had . . .or activities we did and almost having a place to do that [with administrators]."

Third grade teacher, Cultural Competency Topical group

recommendations

overview of the section

We summarize some the evaluation highlights and recommendations for future phases/cohorts.

recommendations

Mindsets

The ECLC helps to promote and increase positive mindsets among educators for working with diverse learners

However, more intentional discussion of equity and equality may be warranted.

During this first phase, ECLC participants were highly engaged and motivated to reflect on their beliefs and practices and early findings suggest that they are becoming more asset-based, becoming less colorblind and adopting more positive mindsets about inclusion. However, participants may be confusing or conflating ideas of "equality" and "equity" and their views on these issues remained largely unchanged. More explicit or intentional discussion on the differences between and consequences of these mindsets may be warranted.

Participants have already begun to change their practice to better support diverse learners.

And would benefit from even more new and challenging content to drive their practice going forward.

In addition to their changes in mindset, participants also shared ways in which they have changed their practice, including using more culturally-relevant instructional practices, increasing student voice and choice, and using data to inform their practice. And while the material reinforced what they already knew in some cases, most agreed that they had considerable new information, which challenged them, at times encouraging them to reflect (and change) their practices.

recommendations

Structures

The cross-district, learning community approach provided a clear value proposition.

Continue to emphasize the benefits of belonging to sustain participation of current districts and to recruit new districts.

The recognition or revelation that all six districts were facing similar dilemmas provided a clear value proposition to participating in the learning community. Participants/districts accustomed to working in isolation benefited from the cross-district collaboration where they could learn about different approaches for dealing with similar challenges, and felt more confident that this was not a one-time thing but a long-term effort to improve education in Essex County.

Time demands and the pace of the work was a challenge for participants.

Provide incoming cohorts with a clear description of the project, timeline, time commitment and deliverables, as well as expectations for how lead and topical teams should work together.

Participants found this to be a worthwhile but very demanding and fast-paced experience, and offered several suggestions for helping future cohorts manage these demands better, including providing clearer expectations and/or estimates for the time commitment, a template for or an example of a district plan to guide them, more team time at meetings and facilitation support during team time/meetings to help teams use their time more efficiently and equitably.

Essex County Learning Community

The Essex County Learning Community (ECLC) is a cross-district experience for educators from public school districts just north of Boston. The goal of the ECLC is to use a community of practitioners approach to lift up and scale district, school, and classroom strategies that enable educators to better serve students with diverse learning assets and needs. It is directed by Full Frame Communications and the Center for Collaborative Education, with funding from the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation.

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